

***Harold Covington's
GAY HISTORY SERIES
– Lesson #7***

***Buggering Bosie
The Trials of Oscar Wilde (1895)***

[Yes, this is a long one. I admit, Oscar Wilde is something of a hobby of mine. I think his entire life and case is a hoot. – HAC]

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (16 October 1854 – 30 November 1900) was an Irish writer and poet. Today he is remembered for his epigrams, plays and for his absurd homosexual affair with a little horror called Lord Alfred Douglas, known as “Bosie.” Like Senator Larry “Twinkle-Toes” Craig, Wilde had the whole world at his feet, and yet he threw it all away because he simply could not overcome this insane addiction to wild-eyed bungholery which possesses these people utterly until they destroy themselves. Homosexuality is a form of slow suicide.

Wilde's parents were successful Dublin intellectuals. His father, Sir William Wilde, was at one point Dublin's most prominent physician, but he as well seemed to have trouble controlling his sexual urges; in Wilde's youth his father became involved in a scandalous court case over his allegedly “taking liberties,” as the saying went, with one of his attractive young female patients while she was under the ether.

Young Oscar learned at least four foreign languages as a child. He was educated at Trinity College , Dublin and then at Oxford University where he proved himself to be an outstanding classicist. He became known for his involvement in the rising philosophy of aestheticism, led by two of his tutors, Walter Pater and John Ruskin, a movement which from the very beginning reeked of pootery. The aesthetic subculture marked the first emergence of the kind of Liberace-style homo today referred to as a “screaming queen,” of which Oscar Wilde was one of the early prototypes.

After university, Wilde moved to London into fashionable cultural and social circles. As a spokesman for aestheticism, he published poems and essays. In 1882 he went on a lecture tour of the United States , where he addressed bemused audiences wearing a “Little Lord Fauntleroy” costume consisting knickerbockers, lace-trimmed sleeves, knee-socks, shoes with silver buckles and a large floppy lace-trimmed hat over long, flowing hair like a girl. (Wild was in his late 20s at the time.) On one occasion he had to flee from a lynch mob in some town out in Colorado . Those cowboys got it, even if fashionable London society didn't. Yet.

On his return to London Wilde wrote extensively as a journalist. “Known for his biting wit, flamboyant dress, and glittering conversation, he became one of the most well-known personalities of his day.” Starting to sound familiar?

Now, to give the man his due, Wilde was capable of some pretty funny quips, to be sure:

“I can resist anything but temptation.”

“The British aristocracy indulges in fox-hunting. It is the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable.”

“I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train.”

“We can have but one great experience at best, and the secret of life is to reproduce that experience as often as possible.” (The closest Wilde ever came to explaining why he chose to waste his life and talent on a squalid and sordid lust, the one thing absolutely guaranteed to destroy him.)

“Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much.”

“The best way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it.”

“The only thing to do with good advice is pass it on; it is never of any use to oneself.”

Wilde could be nasty as well. One of his admirers, an Oxford student named Lionel Johnson, was so short as to be almost be a midget. Wilde said that Johnson “once stepped out of the Café Royal and hailed a passing perambulator (baby carriage.)” He referred to one pseudo-intellectual of his acquaintance that “he wanted to found a salon, but he only made a saloon.” He said of another acquaintance, “He hasn’t an enemy in the world, but all his friends hate him.”

You get the idea. A very gay sense of humor, in every sense of the term good and bad. Witty and flip, a mile wide and an inch deep, as we’d say back home. Wilde’s famous wit was particular to his place and time and level of society, but it doesn’t really translate well into modern times, and in a few more years won’t translate at all as we descend into Obamanable horror. It’s kind of hard to be enthralled with epicene and elegant British upper class epigrams from a world that no longer exists when one is living under a bridge and one’s kids are getting rained on. Wilde’s plays as well are well-written, sassy, and, well...cute, for want of a better word, but shallow and very much specific to Wilde’s era and class.

If you want to get a gander at Wilde in his full flower, check out the movie version of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, with faggot actor Rupert Everett as Algernon, Colin Firth playing Ernest, and Reese Witherspoon (one of the few American actresses who can do a convincing English accent) as Cecily. You’ll see what I mean. Cute, but not really relevant to anything in the real world, now or then. Some immortal works of poetry and literature speak to the ages. Oscar Wilde’s stuff doesn’ - with two exceptions which will be discussed in due course.

Wilde hit the big time in 1890 with his first short novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian Gray is a wealthy and narcissistic young man about town who attracts the attention of an artist named Basil Hallward and a cynical old roué named Lord Henry Wootton, probably one of the most thoroughly unpleasant characters in all English literature. Wootton spouts a kind of nihilist, Crowley-esque “Do What Thou Wilt” pseudo-philosophy to justify his own pointless and vicious existence of hedonism and debauchery.

Realizing that one day his beauty will fade, Dorian whimsically expresses a desire to sell his soul to ensure the portrait Basil has painted would age rather than he. Dorian’s wish is fulfilled, and once he realizes that he can now (literally) get away with anything up to and including murder, Dorian becomes completely evil and commits a variety of grotty acts, at least by 1890s standards, most of which would barely raise a yawn today. Down through the years the portrait ages and shows all the effects of Dorian’s sinful career, turning into something resembling the Crypt Keeper, while Dorian himself remains youthful and beautiful. It’s actually a fairly good novel - no question about it, whatever else his many faults, Wilde was a damned good writer - and so I won’t ruin the plot for those who haven’t read it.

But the whole book reeks of homosexuality, to the point where even the hidebound Victorians couldn’t miss it, and it caused an uproar in a time when one quite literally did not speak of such things, at all. (When the future King George V, then a naval midshipman, had explained to him why a certain officer had been cashiered, the puzzled young man replied “I thought men like that shot themselves.”) The original publisher made numerous changes to the novel, several manuscripts of which survive. Deletions to Wilde’s typescript made prior to publication include the removal of several passages alluding to homosexuality and homosexual desire, but it still wasn’t enough. The novel was published in June of 1890 in *Lippincott’s Magazine*, and even in its Bowdlerized version, British reviewers widely condemned the book for immorality.

Actually, they downright crucified it. The novel was so controversial that W. H. Smith (the British version of Barnes and Noble, to this day) pulled that month’s edition of *Lippincott’s* from its bookstalls in railway stations. Needless to say, this only made the novel even more popular, (I wish to hell the U.S. government would legally ban *The Brigade* and make me a bestselling author) and Wilde found himself the author of a runaway bestseller. Wilde followed up by writing a play in French called *Salomé* which contained female S & M and a kind of exotic strip-tease called *The Dance of the Seven Veils*, which couldn’t even get licensed to be performed at all in London despite the fact that it was in French. It was considered too obscene and shocking, as well as referring to Biblical characters and depicting them dancing around the stage half naked.

In 1884, Wilde committed one of the worst acts of his life, when he married a lovely young woman named Constance Lloyd, and eventually fathered two sons with her. So much for homosexuality being genetic and “something that can’t be helped.” It is an act, not a condition. It’s not something one is, it is something one chooses to do. Faggots from Greece and Rome until modern times seem perfectly capable of indulging in normal sex in for the purpose of carrying on the family line, or possibly as a smokescreen for their other activities, but the emotional cruelty these men inflict on their wives is abominable. Everyone who ever met Constance Wilde loved her and regarded her as a saint, and his mistreatment of her had almost as much to do with the contempt with which society eventually rejected Wilde as did his actual sodomy.

Around 1890, Wilde was introduced to Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas, a 20 year-old undergraduate at Oxford , and began the sodomitic relationship which would eventually destroy his life. Bosie was an active homosexual who wrote a famous (or infamous) poem published in a student magazine called *The Spirit Lamp*, which refers to “the love that dare not speak its name.” Wilde became obsessed with Douglas, more or less abandoned his wife to travel around Europe with him to a series of hotels, and ended up spending most of his income on buying Douglas fripperies and gourmet meals in restaurants. In return, Douglas cheated on him with “rent boys” (guess), spent Wilde’s money extravagantly and sometimes literally picked his pocket while he was asleep looking for booze or gambling money, distracted him from writing and constantly made what Wilde referred to as “scenes,” i.e. typical faggot screaming hissy fits over nothing.

The nature of the two men’s relationship was obvious and was becoming increasingly indiscreet, but so far the old Victorian code of “keep up appearances and we will pretend we don’t see” was holding, especially in view of Wilde’s successful comic plays such as *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. One individual who was appalled, however, was Douglas’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry, who devised the Queensberry rules for boxing.

Queensberry was admittedly about half insane, and he himself had a long record of bizarre and abusive relationships with women, everyone from prostitutes and chambermaids to his wives and women of his own class. (He liked it rough; the women didn’t.) Madness and perversion seemed to run in the Douglas family: the old man was a nutter, two of the sons (Alfred and a brother) turned out to be fruit flies, and a third son blew his own brains out with a shotgun. A good example of the way the British aristocracy was beginning to degenerate through in-breeding and having nothing to do.

However, nutter though he was, Queensberry had already lost one son to buggery and another to suicide, and he was determined to prevent Alfred, his youngest, from following suit. The kid was already way too far gone, but Queensberry refused to accept that, and kept trying to break Bosie and Wilde up.

He did so in very clumsy ways, following them all over London and making scenes. At one point he planned to obtain a ticket to the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and pelt Wilde with rotten vegetables from the gallery when he went on stage for his author’s call. On another occasion he hired some punch-drunk boxer and invaded Wilde’s home in Tite Street, London, presumably to work him over, but Wilde talked his way out of it. (He really was a superb conversationalist). Queensberry wrote letters to his son demanding that he dump Wilde or his allowance would be cut off and he would be disinherited; Bosie responded with a telegram stating “What a funny little man you are.” Bosie took to carrying a pistol, allegedly to protect himself from his roughneck dad, and somehow he managed to fire it off during one of his and Wilde’s intimate dinners in the Carlton Club, which went over well with the other diners and the waiters.

On February 18, 1895, the Marquess left his calling card at Wilde’s club, the Albemarle, inscribed: “For Oscar Wilde, posing as a sodomite” [sic]. Wilde, who had managed to get caught in a mighty family drama between lunatic father and perverted son, was egged on by Bosie and against the advice of his friends, indeed against all rationality, initiated a private prosecution against Queensberry, who was arrested on a charge of criminal libel, a charge carrying a possible sentence of up to two years in prison: as sodomy was then a crime, Queensberry’s note amounted to a public accusation that Wilde had committed a felony.

The problem was, of course, that Wilde had committed that felony on numerous occasions, with Douglas and a number of other members of his circle as well as with the young male prostitutes called “rent boys,” and he had been increasingly indiscreet. He wasn’t just posing as a sodomite, he was one, and

Queensberry could prove it. Queensberry's lawyers hired private detectives to find evidence of Wilde's homosexual liaisons to prove the fact of the accusation.

The libel trial opened on April 3, 1895 amid scenes of near hysteria both in the press and the public that is hard for us to imagine today. In these times every sixth-grader knows what fellatio and sodomy are, thanks if nothing else to former President Bill Clinton, but it must be remembered that this was 1895, and as I said before, people simply did not speak of such things in those days. Or more recently, for that matter. I myself didn't learn what homosexuality was until after I joined the U.S. Army. I think that one of the most quietly horrifying scenes in history must have been that day in the spring of 1895 when Oscar Wilde's lawyer, of all people, had to sit Constance Wilde down in his office and explain to her exactly what it was her husband was accused of. Up until then the wretched woman had no idea such things even existed. It must have been a mortifying hell for both Constance and the solicitor who was forced to actually speak of such things to a lady. He probably had nightmares about it for years afterwards.

The Cleveland Street male brothel scandal of six years before had been kept out of the press, especially after one of the Prince of Wales' friends was forced to flee to the Continent, but here for the first time possibly in British history was an open and public discussion of homosexuality in all its degradation. A large part of the testimony came from rent boys themselves, and chambermaids who had cleaned up hotel rooms after Wilde's sessions with Douglas and the rent boys, and the details were really grotty. Even though the judge often sealed the courtroom and respectable papers such as the *Times* retreated behind a smokescreen of Latin to describe the specific acts, the "gutter press," of Britain, as raunchy then as it is today, was able to get the story out to the fascinated multitude.

Queensberry's lawyers, led by Edward Carson QC, who later became a famous Ulster Loyalist leader during the Irish Troubles, led the court and press to the world of the Victorian homo underground where rent boys called "Mary Annes" dressed up in women's clothing in male brothels for their "gentlemen" and sometimes engaged in orgies where they all "danced the slap-bum polka." (Yes, really. Don't ask.) Wilde's association with blackmailers and male prostitutes, cross-dressers and homosexual brothels was recorded, and various persons involved were interviewed, some being coerced to appear as witnesses since they too were accomplices of the crimes to which Wilde was accused.

Wilde was eventually forced to drop the case when it was clear that Queensberry had nailed him dead to rights, but not before he had been cross-examined regarding two suggestive letters Wilde had written to Douglas, which the defence had in its possession. These referred to Bosie's lips being "made for the madness of kissing" as well as "the love that dare not speak its name," which was pretty hot stuff in 1895. Carson cross-examined Wilde on how he perceived the moral content of his works, and Wilde replied with characteristic wit and flippancy, claiming that works of art are not capable of being moral or immoral but only well or poorly made, and that only "brutes and illiterates", whose views on art "are incalculably stupid," would make such judgments about art. This in front of a stuffy middle class jury. Way to go, Oscar.

Apparently, Wilde thought he could talk his way out of this one with his usual witty charm, but then Carson brought on the rent boys - witness after witness testifying to Wilde having bought sex for money, and from servants and chambermaids who, contrary to Victorian belief, did in fact have eyes and ears in their heads and knew perfectly well what the masters and mistresses got up to at night in the corridors and bedrooms of Frumpington Hall on house party weekends. A high point, or low point, came when Carson asked Wilde directly whether he had ever kissed a certain servant boy, Wilde responded, "Oh, dear no. He was a particularly plain boy - unfortunately ugly - I pitied him for it." This went over a bomb with the jury as well.

Halfway through the libel trial, Wilde threw in the towel and withdrew the case, but it was too late. A highly pissed off judge issued an arrest warrant for Wilde on charges of "gross indecency" and sent a couple of Scotland Yard detectives after him. They found Wilde in a luxury hotel which the manager had just asked him to leave, and dragged him off to Newgate Prison to cool his hands in the twilight of things Gothick. (Oscar Wilde inside joke.)

Something I didn't know myself until I started researching this piece was that on the night of his arrest, at Wilde's instruction, bugger boy Robert Ross and Wilde's butler forced their way into the bedroom and library of 16 Tite Street and packed up some "personal effects, manuscripts, and letters", some of which presumably incriminated Douglas or could have been used as evidence against Wilde. The exact nature of

this material was apparently never determined. One wonders how many late Victorian artists, writers, dramatists, actors, and intellectuals might have been named in these documents, such as the famous illustrator Aubrey Beardsley and writers like Max Beerbohm.

Under the *Libel Act 1843*, Queensberry's acquittal rendered Wilde legally liable for Queensberry's expenses, such as hiring the private detectives who exposed him in court. This eventually led to Wilde becoming bankrupt, although with all he had spent on Bosie, there wasn't much bank left to rupt.

Wilde was tried twice on the faggotry charges, having gotten a hung jury in the first criminal trial, and he actually managed to make bail for a couple of weeks in between the first trial and the second. His theatrical and literary friends - many of whom were worried Wilde would break and rat them out for their own buggeries past - pleaded with him to flee to France, but he seemed stupefied, paralyzed, drained of all will.

You see, on the urgent (not to say frantic) advice of his lawyers, Wilde had lost his beloved Bosie. Douglas had been more or less ordered out of the country by the lawyers so he could not be called as a witness, and he was skulking in France writing passionate letters to the editor defending Wilde, which were never published. Already the hammer of official disapproval was coming down on Wilde's candy ass. He had failed to keep up appearances, and he was done. When he was finally sentenced to two years in prison (along with Alfred Taylor, the keeper of one of the male brothels he frequented,) Wilde collapsed in the dock and was dragged below by the guards, moaning and crying out hysterically "Bosie! Bosie!"

Wilde was imprisoned first in Pentonville and then Wandsworth Prison in London. His health declined sharply, and in November he collapsed during chapel from illness and hunger. His right ear drum was ruptured in the fall, an injury that would later contribute to his death. He spent two months in the infirmary. Wilde was transferred to Reading Prison by train. The transfer itself was the lowest point of his incarceration, as a crowd jeered and spat at him on the platform. Now known as prisoner C. 3.3 he was not, at first, even allowed paper and pen but eventually succeeded in gaining access to books and writing materials through the permission of the new warden, Major Nelson, who has been described by some writers as a "humane man" but who may have simply been bribed by Wilde's friends to grant privileges. (Even at this early stage there was a closeted homo clique in the upper circles of society that appears to have supported Wilde in many covert ways, for example in buying back some of the property at his bankruptcy sale.)

Between January and March 1897 Wilde wrote a 50,000 word letter to Douglas, which he was not allowed to send, but was permitted to take with him upon release. This became known as *De Profundis* ("from the depths") and is considered the greatest prose work Wilde ever produced. It is also, in my opinion, one of the funniest things I have ever read, although quite unintentionally.

HM Prison, Reading

"Dear Bosie - After long and fruitless waiting I have determined to write to you myself, as much for your sake as for mine, as I would not like to think that I had passed through two long years of imprisonment without ever having received a single line from you, or any news or message even, except such as gave me pain ..."

Basically, the entire spirit and content of *De Profundis* can be reduced to one simple theme: "Bosie, you BITCH!" It is the ultimate scream of a betrayed queen against the catamite who has become his life-destroying obsession. In admittedly superb prose, Wilde unwittingly details everything that is wrong with the homosexual lifestyle, the whole unnatural and unhealthy atmosphere of narcissism and alienation from humanity that clings to it like poison gas. It is worthwhile reading for any true anti-faggot.

On his release, Wilde gave the manuscript to his previous nancy boy Ross, who may or may not have carried out Wilde's instructions to send a copy to Bosie. (Ross and Douglas hated and were violently jealous of one another.) Later, Douglas denied having received it, which I suppose is understandable in view of the embarrassing contents. Never before has one man been so thoroughly dissected like a frog in a tray, displaying all his faults and failings to the world, than Alfred Douglas in *De Profundis*.

Wilde was released on May 19, 1897, having served every last day of his sentence. Indeed, prison officials timed his release literally down to the minute of his sentencing in court to make sure he did the full two

years. He fled to France that night and never returned to England. Ever one for dramatic gestures, he took the name "Sebastian Melmoth", after the titular character of *Melmoth The Wanderer*; a Gothic novel by Charles Maturin, Wilde's great-uncle.

Now, you would think that by now Wilde would have learned his lesson where buggery was concerned, and where Lord Alfred Douglas in particular was concerned. The two years in the joint surely caused the little light bulb to come on over this intelligent and perceptive if perverted man's noggin, Right?

Not a bit of it. Are you ready for this? Having been released from prison after serving every minute of a two year sentence because of this creepy little sissy, after having spent 50,000 words denouncing said creepy little sissy in some of the purplest and most vindictive and vituperative prose ever written in the English language, Wilde then - wait for it! - Wilde then goes back to him! Like a dog returning to its vomit.

The fact that this happened to my mind tends to support Douglas 's contention that he did not read *De Profundis* at that time. It is hard to imagine a raving egotist like Bosie going back to Wilde if he had read what Wilde had to say about him.

That was the straw that broke the long-suffering Constance Wilde's back. She was living in exile in Switzerland, and already refusing to meet Wilde or allow him to see their two sons, though she kept him supplied with money. But during the latter part of 1897, when she heard that her husband had actually gone back to his slimy little bumboy after everything, Constance finally cut him off. She herself died after a botched surgical operation shortly thereafter; it is not clear whether or not Wilde ever got any more money from his wife's estate, but it is known that his last years were spent in dire poverty.

In 1898, Wilde finally dumped Bosie, apparently in exchange for some kind of financial arrangement with Douglas 's remaining brother. His last address was at the dingy Hôtel d'Alsace (now known as L'Hôtel), in Paris, and his last recorded witticism before he died in 1900, despised and penniless, was the grim comment, while lying on his deathbed, that "I despise that wallpaper. One of us has to go." When a friend showed up to console him Wilde said, "I am dying beyond my means."

I said earlier that most of Wilde's work was shallow and superficial, if witty, and it didn't really translate into modern times, but there are two exceptions, exceptions which show he had true talent, potentially a great talent, and which makes me all the more irritated at the way he pissed it all away up Bosie's backside.

The first exception is *De Profundis*, which despite the sordid subject matter (a vain and self-indulgent faggot sent to prison by a horrid little twerp) is so well written, with such a complete command and masterful use of language, that as squalid as the topic is, it's a joy to read. It is the ultimate in literary "Fuck off and die" works, and knowing the whole story as I do, I genuinely think it's a scream, although that is definitely a politically incorrect interpretation.

The second exception is the one thing that Wilde wrote after his release from prison, after he had spent two years being forcibly dragged out of his effete fantasy life and his completely artificial world of boutonnieres and evening dress and exquisite little first night suppers and the general effete uselessness of the British upper class for the past 200 years. It is an epic poem called *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which in my purely personal opinion ranks among the top ten masterpieces in the English language, for one brief moment ranking Wilde with Shakespeare, Swift, Milton, Wordsworth, et. al. Oscar Wilde got a dose of reality, pain, horror, and misery, the stuff of real life, right in the face, and it sobered him up and focused at least some degree of genuine genius, at least once before he collapsed back into effeminate weakness and self-pity:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard.
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word.
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword.

To top off the horror, Wilde's oldest son Cyril was slaughtered in the trenches in 1915. Bosie Douglas lived a long and useless life, and died in 1945 at the age of 74 after falling off his horsey, possibly while in full pursuit of the uneatable.